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ABSTRACT

Assessors of literature learning have long been concerned with the issue of difficulty and the fundamental contradictions in the term "examination of literary understanding." An alternate view of literature is that although texts are finally indeterminate, a group of them has been set aside by communities as forming a part of the communal experience. Communities have selected them to be read aesthetically, and so the texts have developed a set of associations with each other. Subsequent writers acculturated into this "tradition" produce texts which are highly allusive to this communal set of literature. Literature curriculum, therefore, has the function of bringing the individual into the community, and appears to be aimed at providing the student with the requisite knowledge of the communal canon, as well as with the ways of reading that preserve the appropriate view of the functions of texts in the community. It follows that the difficulty of text is only partially determined by various characteristics of the text itself. A text's difficulty actually depends on the nature of the understanding expected. From this revised view of the curriculum in literature and of difficulty, those concerned with assessment can derive a set of principles by which to select texts, questions concerning texts, and criteria for judging answers to the questions. (Twenty-six references are included.) (PRA)

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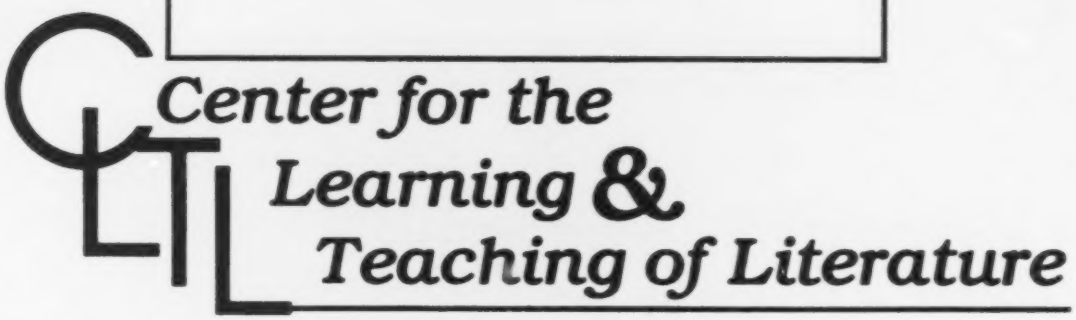
Indeterminate Texts, Responsive Readers, and the Idea of Difficulty in Literature Learning

Alan C. Purves



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Indeterminate Texts, Responsive Readers, and the Idea of Difficulty in Literature Learning

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Those involved with the assessment of literature learning have long been concerned with the issue of difficulty. They have had to face the issue in their determination of what is to be tested and how, and the question of how one concludes that one student is "better" than another. Since examiners must deal with a psychometric world that seeks certainty and definitiveness of answers, reliability in the rating of performance, and the ability to rank students on a true scale from the able reader to the insensitive clod, they encounter a complex set of problems. It is the purpose of this paper to address both the dilemma which examinees face and the fundamental contradictions in the very term "examination of literary understanding."

Traditionally examiners have focused upon one of three aspects of the curriculum, depending upon which has held sway within the profession and the schools: knowledge of texts and related information (biographical information and literary terms); critical and interpretive reading performance with respect to individual texts or groups of texts, including the application of knowledge; and attitudes concerning literature and particular texts, including the affective aspects of understanding a text (Applebee, 1971; Purves, 1971, 1973; Purves & Beach, 1973).

Literature learning as knowledge

In the first and oldest view of the curriculum, literature is viewed as a school subject with its own body of knowledge. This body consists primarily of literary texts, perhaps specified by genre, date, theme, author, and other classifications. These particular texts are set in part by experts, in part by those who purvey textbooks, and in part by teachers and curriculum planners. There are three other broad areas of literature content: 1. historical and background information concerning authors, texts, and the times in which they were written, or that form their subject matter; 2. information concerning critical terminology, critical strategies, and literary theory; and 3. information of a broad cultural nature, such as that emerging from folklore and mythology which forms a necessary starting point for the reading of many literary texts. From the 1930's up into the 1970's, many commercial tests and examinations focused upon such matters as authors and titles, as well as questions pertaining to history and to certain critical terms. Difficulty was seen as comprising increasingly recondite items and details, or it was seen as following a progression based on a determination of which texts from the canon were taught in which years of school. Addison's "Sir Roger deCoverley" would be appropriate for the junior high school, Lamb's "Elia" for the senior high school.

This perspective on literature teaching and learning has been frequently criticized as focusing too much on things external to the text. At the same time, many have argued that such factual knowledge is crucial to the acts of reading and writing. In the world of testing, there are few commercial tests that concentrate on this sort of knowledge (usually at the college level), although it formed the basis of the 1987 study of cultural knowledge (Ravitch & Finn, 1987; Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1987).

Literature learning as reading and writing

In the 1960's, there began a shift in the content of literature tests away from an emphasis on factual knowledge towards one on critical reading of texts presumed unfamiliar to the student. This shift can be thought of as the incorporation of the New Criticism into the curriculum. In some respects the move can also be seen as a politically expedient one as the canon was challenged by a variety of groups arguing for a broadening or even an elimination of any canonical approach to the literature curriculum. Those who create tests of critical reading seek to determine difficulty on some basis associated with the nature of the text, whether it be morphological, syntactic, structural, or referential. The precise combination of textual factors and a clear formula for determining difficulty has eluded most literary scholars and certainly has eluded testmakers.

This perspective on school literature has often been fitted---rather uncomfortably--into "the language arts," which are defined as reading, writing, speaking and listening. Since literature involves texts that people read or write, and since when students read literature they often write about what they have read, literature is often seen as simply a subset of reading and writing, with an occasional nod to speaking and listening. Literature fits into the program as something pleasant to read and perhaps as something interesting to write about. This view seems to prevail in the basal reading approach to elementary schools (see Walmsley & Walp, 1989), and carries on into the secondary school curriculum. Literature is a content to promote skills in reading and writing or to promote individual growth, depending upon the ideology attached to language arts instruction. In the current world of tests, literature is often a vehicle for reading comprehension tests or for measures of writing skill and proficiency rather than a measure of the skills set forward by the New Critics or the structuralists.

Literature learning as the development of habits

The third aspect of the curriculum, that concerning attitudes, interests and habits as well as the affective component of reading and responding to literary texts, has not been covered extensively in examinations, although it has been the focus of extremely vocal groups both in and out of schools. Some of those in schools have been concerned with personal growth and development and with the "student-centered" curriculum; those out of the schools have been concerned with issues of censorship and morality. Both groups have proclaimed the importance of the development of preferred habits in reading and discourse about what has been read even though they have been on opposite sides of various political fences. These aspects of the curriculum have been difficult to measure and it has been hard to set criteria for determining difficulty and development. Many of the advocates of this kind of a curriculum have called for the abolition of tests of any sort and have chosen more "subjective" approaches to determining achievement.

This group sees the domain of literature learning as the development of a different kind of reading from that used with other texts. This kind of reading is called "aesthetic" and is opposed to the reading that one does with informational texts. Recent literary theory has come to view literature less in terms of the writer and more in terms of the reader, for it appears to be the reader, particularly the informed and trained reader, who defines a text as literary and reads it not for the information, but for the experience of the nuances of the text itself. Such a definition follows from the strand of thinking that developed from I. A. Richard's Practical

Criticism (1929), where the idea that the reader helped form the meaning of the text was given cogent voice. The summary of the position is best expressed by Louise Rosenblatt in The Reader, The Text, The Poem (1978), who says that literary texts are grounded in the real world of writers who may or may not intend them to be seen poetically.

Thus a major function of literature education is the development of what one might call preferences, which is to say habits of mind in reading and writing. One must learn to read aesthetically and to switch lenses when one moves from social studies to poetry. In addition, literature education is supposed to develop something called "taste" or the love of "good literature," so that literature education goes beyond reading and writing in the inculcation of specific sets of preferred habits of reading and writing about that particular body of texts which is called literature. Difficulty in this view can be seen as being partly contained in the relationship between reader and text, and in the "subtlety" of the discourse about the aesthetic experience.

The current situation

One of the studies by the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature comprised an analysis of the available tests in secondary school (Brody, DeMilo, & Purves, 1989). The analysis showed that for the most part the tests that contained literary passages asked questions about them as if they were the same as passages from encyclopedias. There was some testing of general literary knowledge but virtually no testing of knowledge or application of critical terminology, and virtually no testing of analysis or aesthetic judgment. One might argue that this state of affairs results from a clear victory of the reading and writing group and the triumph of the New Critics. A more cynical interpretation would have it that there is in fact a void in the testing of learning in literature because there is no strong advocate for including literature in assessment programs. Certainly there is not a clear theoretical position upon which to base a testing program that would resolve the issue of difficulty. In the remainder of this paper, I should like to attempt that task.

A functional definition of literature based upon the community of readers

Let us begin with some definitions. Texts are artifacts produced by a genus that one calls writer or author. Texts possess in common the broad features of having a content (that subject matter or referential world with which they deal), a structure, and a set of distinctive linguistic features which are often referred to as style and tone. These three divisions are ones that readers and writers often make even though the readers and writers realize that the sum of the text is greater than the parts, and that the text may be perceived as an organic whole.

Writers may have in mind a variety of functions for the text they are writing when they write. A literary text, to the extent there is a separate type, may only be defined as the verbal expression of the writer's imagination, a definition too broad to be useful. One reason is that readers may also see a given text as having one of a number of functions as they read it, and their perception may not coincide with that of the writer. In general the range of functions tends to approximate those set forth by Jakobson (1987): metalingual, expressive, referential, conative, poetic, and phatic. In general, too, no writer or reader perceives a text as being a pure representative of a single function. The functions mix and the labels are only partial descriptors.

Recent literary theory has come to view literature less in terms of the writer and more in terms of the reader, for it appears to be the reader, particularly the informed and trained reader, who defines a text as literary. A reader may allow all sorts of works which once had been excluded or marginal (essays, letters, biographies, and the like) as a part of a literary group. Once written, texts become alive only when they are read, and they become literary when a reader chooses to read them as aesthetic objects rather than as documents.

The individual reader does not operate in a vacuum. Most readers belong to a community, a group of people who share certain common perceptions and beliefs about the function of texts in society (cf. Fish, 1980; Purves, 1985b, 1986, 1988). These readers bring common background knowledge concerning the substance, structure, and style of the texts in order to ascertain the meaning and significance of the text. The meaning is that which can be verified by the community, perhaps with recourse to the historical grounding of the text, if such is available. The significance is personal in terms of the communal perception.

Different communities of readers tend to allocate a function to a given text as they incorporate it into a body of texts. That is, they will assign a text to a group with a similar function or genre (e.g., poem, story, literature). These communities are often related to critical schools or to critical positions which determine the literary nature of a given text. Literary texts, then, do not exist as a separate category of text that can be defined in terms of certain internal characteristics *sub specie aeternitatis*. Rather, literary texts tend to be proximally defined as those that communities perceive as literary, which is to say that they are texts that a significant number of readers read aesthetically and claim should be so read.

This theoretical position thus argues that any text has the potential of being literary should a significant group of knowledgeable and experienced readers determine that there is value in reading the text as an aesthetic object. In this way, such works as the speeches of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., the letters of John Keats and J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, and the Diary of Anne Frank become literary objects and part of the canon in the United States. Readers have read them in the light of a common experience of literary texts and have derived principles of "literariness" which allow them to accept these works. In part, their criteria are formal and structural, in part they arise from consideration of the breadth of vision of the writer. However determined, there comes to exist a set of texts which the community refers to as "literature," which is to say it is to be viewed functionally as being predominantly poetic and therefore to be read aesthetically. This accretion of a canon comes particularly with the advent of formal schooling and the inclusion of mother-tongue instruction--although it had its roots in "classical" language instruction.

From this communal network of texts that grows over time and that is part of the background that weaves a community into one, comes one of the well-known features of literature--its tendency to feed upon itself as well as upon folklore, myth, and historical events (Frye, 1957; Hirsch, 1983,1987; Bakhtin,1981). Many literary works are clearly situated in a web of culture, just as many others are situated in a specific time and place (e.g., Jonathan Swift's works, which are clearly situated in 18th century England). We may argue that when a writer selects a given word, she is doing so with a penumbra of associations and references which are peculiarly hers and her culture's and have reference to her reading as well as her conversation and other linguistic experiences. One of the clearest examples of this can be seen in the work of John Livingstone Lowes, who in The Road to Xanadu (1927) traced every line in Coleridge's

"Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kublai Khan" to its source in one of the hundreds of books that Coleridge had read. Literature uses allusion and many writers presume background knowledge on the part of the reader even though the allusions have been transmuted into a new artifact. Non-literary texts also presume much of the same knowledge. But there is the difference that literary texts form part of a large textual world that is interdependent and which forms that thing called literature. So the literary community determines.

The view of literature that I have set forth is that although texts are finally indeterminate, a group of them has been set aside by communities as forming a part of the communal experience. These communities have selected them to be read aesthetically, and by virtue of that fact, the texts have developed a set of associations with each other. Subsequent writers acculturated into this "tradition" produce texts which are highly allusive to this communal set of literature. I might add that what has happened in the literary world has also happened in certain transnational disciplines such as psychology and economics. Certain texts have emerged as a core upon which other texts have built. The core in both cases challenges, and at times drops, certain writers and texts as it adds others. It is a fluid corpus, not a fixed canon; the organic metaphor is quite appropriate.

Literature education as induction into the community

This brings us back to the issue of the literature curriculum. It appears to have the function of bringing the individual into the community. That is to say, it appears to be aimed at providing the student with the requisite knowledge of the communal canon, as well as with the ways of reading that preserve the appropriate view of the functions of texts in the community. In Purves (1971), there was laid out a depiction of the literature curriculum in terms of content and behaviors. The content consists primarily of literary texts, which may be specified by genre, date, theme, author, and other classifications. The particular texts are set in part by experts, in part by those who purvey textbooks, and in part by teachers and curriculum planners. There are four other broad areas of literature content: historical and background information concerning authors, texts, and the times in which they were written or that form their subject matter; information concerning critical terminology, critical strategies, and literary theory; information of a broad cultural nature such as that emerging from folklore and mythology which forms a necessary starting point for the reading of many literary texts; and the set of critical strategies, procedures, dispositions, and routines that the community values.

One of the findings of Broudy (1982) when he sought to study how knowledge was used by readers was that the sort of learning that was used most frequently in the protocols was not *what*, but *how*. Although many readers remembered previous texts or bits of text which they used to help them read a new text, in most instances the subjects had learned and applied certain "mannerisms" of reading (for want of a better word), such as one student's immediate distrust of anything that contained metaphor, or another student's manner of reading all literature that derived from the critical theory of Maritain. On subsequent interviews, the readers recalled precisely where they had learned to read certain texts in the ways that they did. Such a finding suggests a corroboration of earlier research on reader response (Purves, 1973, 1981), that readers become culturally indoctrinated into a way of reading literature that they apply to new texts that they read. They can become frustrated if the text does not stand up to the methodology they have acquired.

Another kind of learning that might eventuate from the study of literature would be the acquisition of a communal set of values concerning literature and perhaps arising from the content of the literature read. This has long been the thought of those who create literature programs in the schools as well as those who write. Shelley claimed poets were the unacknowledged legislators of mankind. Emerson sought to create an American literature that would solidify American values. The community has decided what is literature and what literature should be for the reader. The students learn to acquiesce and accept these values as they become loyal to the community.

Thus we have returned to the three views of the curriculum and examinations that we described in the first part of the paper, but in doing so we see that these are complementary and inextricably intertwined rather than being options from which to choose. We would argue that the domain of school literature can be divided into three interrelated aspects: **knowledge**, **practice**, and **preferred habit**. The interrelationships are complex in that one uses knowledge in the various acts that constitute the practice and the preferred habits, and that the practices and preferred habits can have their influence on knowledge. At the same time, one can separate them for the purposes of curriculum planning and, as we shall see, testing. We may schematize the three sub-domains as follows:

SCHOOL LITERATURE

KNOWLEDGE		PRACTICE		PREFERRED HABIT	
Textual	**Extra-textual**	**Responding**	**Articulating**	**Aesthetic Choice**	**Habits Of Behavior**
Specific Text	History	Decoding	Retelling	Evaluating	Reading
Cultural Allusion	Author	Envisioning	Discussing single works	Selecting	Criticizing
	Genres	Analyzing		Valuing	
	Styles	Personalizing	Generalizing across works		
	Critical Terms	Interpreting			

I have omitted under the first group the sorts of knowledge that are requisite to the reading of any text (Purves, 1984, 1985a, 1988) (which is to say knowledge of the lexicon and grammatical and text structures) and have concentrated on that body of knowledge that appears to distinguish literature as a separate and perhaps unique domain. Knowledge of texts can be contained in texts, myths, and folk tales, or it can exist outside of texts as part of the common core. Many people know about a "Romeo" without having read the play.

Under practice, **responding** includes reading, watching, and listening. It includes decoding or making out the plain sense of the text or film, envisioning or coming to some whole impression and recreation of what is read, and the more detailed aspects of analyzing, personalizing, and interpreting. Often people envision without analyzing or interpreting. The term **articulating** covers a wide variety of ways by which students let people know what their response is. Articulation is central to the curriculum in many ways, because like any school subject, literature involves public acts in which the student must be more articulate about procedures and strategies as well as conclusions, than might be true of the subject outside of school. Proofs are not necessary in mathematical applications outside of school; essays about one's reading of a text are not required after reading every library book. It is in the articulation

as well as the display of knowledge and preferred habits that the student comes into contact with the community and is accepted into it. It is hoped that the articulation of a response will come to influence the response itself (Purves, 1971).

In order to preserve the aesthetic nature of the text, and treat the work of literature as literature, not as a treatise on whales, the curriculum seeks to inculcate a communal set of preferred habits. If literary works are not read and talked about as other kinds of texts are read, but are read differently, students must learn how to perform this kind of reading and they must be encouraged to read this way voluntarily. The curriculum then must seek to promote habits of mind in reading and writing. One of these habits is to make aesthetic judgments about the various texts read, and to justify these judgments publically. Personal preference is not sufficient to the curriculum, one must learn to be a critic in the sense of a judge.

Literature education, then, is supposed to develop something called "taste" or the love of "good literature," so that literature education goes beyond reading and writing and specific sets of preferred habits of reading and writing. It may include the development of a tolerance for the variety of literature, a willingness to acknowledge that many different kinds and styles of work can be thought of as literature, and an acceptance that just because we do not like a certain poem, does not mean that it is not good. It can even lead students to distrust the meretricious or the shoddy use of sentiment. Experienced readers of literature can see that they are being tricked by a book or a film even when the trickery is going on--and they can enjoy the experience.

Difficulty redefined

If we redefine learning in literature as has been outlined, so that it involves the intersection of knowledge, practice, and preferred habits, and, so that the standards for learning being achieved are those of the community into which a given individual is entering, the nature of difficulty is resolved as being a combination of: 1) the complexity and detail of requisite knowledge to be a member of the community; 2) the use of that knowledge in responding and articulating a response; and 3) the use of that knowledge in the making of appropriate aesthetic judgments and distinctions between personal and communal standards in the exercise of preferences and habitual behaviors with respect to texts. Such a definition also allows for works to be difficult based not on some intrinsic characteristics, but in terms of their community. Shakespeare may be harder or easier depending upon the nature of the community and its standards concerning knowledge, practice, and preferred habits, and upon the intellectual distance an individual must travel to enter that community.

The difficulty of a text (D), then, varies with the amount of knowledge (K) presumed by the community sufficient for an individual to demonstrate an adequate (A) and appropriate (A^1) articulation of a response to that text:

$$D = K\ (A + A^1)$$

Thus no text is easy or difficult outside of the norms and standards of the community that determines: 1. what is necessary and sufficient knowledge; 2. what is an adequately framed discussion of that text or generalization about the text within a larger discussion of literature; and 3. what is an appropriate aesthetic disposition towards the text.

We can illustrate this principle with the following text as an example:

Buffalo Bill's
defunct

who used to
ride a watersmooth-silver

stallion
and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat

Jesus

he was a handsome man

and what i want to know is
how do you like your blueeyed boy
Mister Death

--e.e. cummings

In terms of knowledge, the difficulty of this poem depends upon the degree to which the community deems it important to know who Buffalo Bill was, the background and poetics of cummings, and cummings's place in twentieth-century American poetry. A group of students can show understanding of the text with a vague knowledge of each of these points. To demand a more precise knowledge immediately makes the poem more difficult. Thus the poem is perhaps easier for a high school class than it might be at the university level.

As it is with knowledge, so it is with practice. The community may require an elaborated discussion of the style and structure of the poem as it relates to an interpretation that deals with the death of a superstar and the views that the American public had of Buffalo Bill, as well as Cummings's ambivalence towards American heroes, the American public, and death. On the other hand, the text could be simply presented to a group of readers with a request for a minimal articulation of a response to the poem, perhaps only a request to identify the author or the period or to read it aloud. If the elaborated knowledge needs to be further integrated into an appropriately detailed essay with proof and counters to alternative interpretations, the poem takes on an additional layer of difficulty.

If one were to add to that the demand that the reader also elaborate an aesthetic judgment of the poem so as to demonstrate an awareness of the norms of reading modern American poetry, and acquiescence to the habit of reading poetry in such a way as to evince delight in the experience, the difficulty of the text increases. If, however, the reader were only asked to comment on a personal judgment as in "Did you like it?" the difficulty is not great.

The difficulty of a literary text then is only partially determined by various characteristics of the text itself. Much more influential are the demands placed by the community upon its members concerning that text. The community may demand a more or less elaborate articulation of the individual reader's knowledge and understanding of the poem, and may set detailed criteria to judge that articulation and the degree to which it satisfies the community's ideal of an aesthetic reading. Just as the community establishes the literary qualities of a text and its canonicity, so it establishes the criteria by which the text's difficulty may be determined. A text's difficulty depends upon the nature of the understanding expected. For this reason, a poem like "The Wasteland" is difficult when a reader is expected to elaborate all of the interconnections, ambiguities, and allusions and make a coherent statement about the poem. The poem is complex because a group of readers has established the ground rules for complexity; if they were to take a more impressionistic view of how the poem is to be read, its

complexity diminishes.

The implications for assessment

From this revised view of the curriculum in literature and the consequent idea of difficulty, those concerned with assessment can derive a set of principles by which to select texts, questions concerning texts, and criteria for judging answers to the questions. We see that the text, question, and criterion are inseparable as determinants of the difficulty of a text. We can perhaps apply the formula $D=K(A+A^1)$ to various combinations as they appear in examinations. At the simplest level, we can argue that a text accompanied by multiple-choice questions should be less difficult than the same text accompanied by an essay question. The main reason for this is that with the multiple-choice question, the answers are already there and the students do not need to generate their own language (cf. Hansson, 1990).

We can also argue that a text such as "Buffalo Bill's defunct" would be easier were the essay question to call upon a greater amount of technical or historical knowledge than if the students were simply to write about their feelings or understanding of the poem. That question could, however, become difficult if the scoring criterion were to be such that the students had to demonstrate a sophisticated writing style or had to match the aesthetic judgment of the adult community seeing this as a classic example of a valid early modern ironic free-verse poem, and not as something so simple-minded that a child could have written it. The difficulty of the poem becomes greater for the graduate student than for the high-school senior.

Conclusion

I do not think that what has been set forth is sufficient to establish an inexorable calculus of textual difficulty. On the contrary, the definition of difficulty I have posited is highly situational and is clearly related to the intersection of the text, the student, and the community. Such situational difficulty is not unlike the definition of interplay of the communal and individual reponse suggested in my earlier work (Purves, 1985). There I suggested that the community of readers that the student-reader inhabits (or is in the process of entering) determines something of the student's response to the poem and thus helps to explain the commonality of readings of a text within a community, as well as the individuality that may occur within that community. The same interplay between individual and community helps to determine the difficulty of a text for the individual. Although texts may be indeterminate, they are not so within a community unless the community so stipulates. The educational system is a communal arrangement and so establishes commonality of interpretation as well as common standards of knowledge, practice, and preferred habits in reading. These common standards may shift as the community becomes more and more esoteric.

The examiner's dilemma as posed at the beginning of this paper may not be solved, but the problems, I believe, are clarified. An examination is something determined with reference to the community of readers into which the individual or the class is being led. In literature, this means that its content and its criteria are communal; so too is the definition of difficulty of a given literary text.

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